Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

Ethical Relativity from the Transactional Point of View
Author(s): Hadley Cantril
Source: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 52, No. 23, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division: Symposium Papers to be Presented at the Fifty-Second Annual Meeting, Boston University, December 27-29, 1955 (Nov. 10, 1955), pp. 677-687
Published by: Journal of Philosophy, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2022568
Accessed: 23-10-2015 22:54 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Journal of Philosophy, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Philosophy*.

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

empirical enquiry. The contribution of behavioral scientists has made essential the use both of the concepts of universality and of relativity in the investigation of human acts in their cross-cultural dimension. Much remains to be done. Especially we require operational techniques for controlling differences of meaning among apparently similar values and for validating similarities when the phenomena appear quite various to the eye of the naive observer. And the sheer demonstration of empirical universals does not, of course, settle any question of absolutes or right or wrong. It is a significant step and would seem to place the burden of proof upon those who would deprecate such values. But, in the main, such proof of universals will merely pose further questions. We must move from description to the testing of hypotheses, from positions to defend to searching for facts that will verify or reject a position. Both extremes have had their chance to speculate, to reason, and to speak out. The proper formulation of the elements of truth in these two extremes, forged in the teeth of the stubborn and irreducible facts now available, will require the coöperation of philosophers and behavioral scientists to the end of carefully pointed empirical investigations that may gradually settle the issues.

CLYDE KLUCKHOHN

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

ETHICAL RELATIVITY FROM THE TRANSACTIONAL POINT OF VIEW *

THE invitation to prepare a paper for the consideration of professional philosophers is one a psychologist accepts only with utmost humility. At the same time, it is most encouraging if philosophers feel a psychologist might have something worthwhile to contribute to a problem so intimately related to the value aspect of human living. Perhaps psychology is beginning to break away from the mechanistic determinism which has so often fenced it in.

My consideration of the subject assigned must necessarily be from a point of view within psychology which seems to me most intrinsically reasonable.[1] I shall not, therefore, discuss in eclectic

* To be presented in a symposium on "Ethical Relativity in the Light of Recent Developments in Social Science" at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, December 28, 1955.

[1] I wish to express again my profound indebtedness to the late Adelbert Ames, Jr., for stimulating discussion around this subject and for memoranda

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

fashion the way the subject could be handled by different "schools" of psychology.

In order to understand the function of morality and of ethical systems in operation, we must approach the subject the way we must approach any other aspect of man's living—from the personal behavior center of an individual who is experiencing and behaving in the concreteness of here and now situations.

Some Tenets of Transactional Psychology

In order to give us a toe-hold on our main problem, it is necessary to sketch here very briefly some of the formulations of transactional psychology itself.[2] Most of these formulations can, we believe, be demonstrated in the psychological laboratory. They stem from our consideration of the nature of perception—a process of human behavior somewhat amenable to research and a problem area which, if we throw away some traditional blinders, plunges us at once into the nature of human experience in general.

Perception, according to this view, is a prognostic directive for purposeful action—not a "subjective" reaction to an "objective" given whether the "given" be an "object," a person, or a verbal symbol. The significance of any sensory impingement, of any "given" from the environment, stems from what an individual learns from his past experience in carrying out his purposeful behavior. Every perception, then, involves some degree of probability, some bet that what is "out there" corresponds to what we assume is "out there." Our perceptions of objects, people, symbols, ideologies, are all, in part, our own creations in that we view them from our own unique personal behavioral centers according to our own purposes.

From the transactional point of view, all that an individual can be aware of is his own interpretation of the importance to him of his on-going behavioral situation in terms of the significances of prior behavioral situations. "Significance" is sensed in terms of experiencing the consequences of action intended to preserve physical well being, to insure the repetition of previously satisfying experiences, or to enhance the value satisfaction potentially

he wrote on many of the topics considered here. I am also indebted to my former Princeton colleague, Dr. F. P. Kilpatrick, for communion on the subject of constancy.

[2] Further discussion will be found in the author's *The "Why" of Man's Experience* (New York: Macmillan, 1950) and "The Qualities of Being Human," *American Quarterly*, Spring 1954, pp. 3–18. More technical papers concerning both theory and experimental research can be found in F. P. Kilpatrick (ed.), *Human Behavior from the Transactional Point of View*, 1952.

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

available from a situation. If our purposes are such that we might make use of any object, person, or symbol, or if any of these threaten our well-being, we take account of their possible use or their sequential significance to us. The sequential significance of some objects, people, or symbols in our field of potential experience may be of the greatest importance to us, while others may be trivial or of no importance whatever. Our awareness is like an enveloping aura protecting us and directing our purposeful action.

The significance of an object, a person, a symbol, or an ethical standard is identical from time to time—remains constant—only when it has the same sequential significance to us for carrying out the same purposes and is in the same functional position relative to our behavioral center.[3] We can carry out our purposes only because of the constancy we assign to our "objective" worlds. Constancy therefore refers to the relative continuation of conditions that enable us to carry out our purposes. It does not refer to objective characteristics themselves.

The degree of our sense of reality of our objective world is based on this constancy—not in constancy for constancy's sake but because constancy insures a higher probability for effective purposeful action. This belief is, of course, supported by the commonly shared aspects of our personal objective worlds. It is perhaps because of the high probability of the conceptually abstracted scientific world of objects that we think of this world as the ultimately real.

In order to get a greater degree of constancy and repeatability in the universe, man introduces artifacts which have definite specifications built in. A major aim of scientific endeavor is to humanize, not to conquer, an essentially neutral nature and thereby to increase the reliability with which one event of some consequence to man in carrying out his purposes will follow another event involving some specified human participation. In order to get a greater degree of constancy in his social life, man creates rules of the game, he introduces mores, rituals, customs, laws, standards. "Culture" is essentially a common pattern of learned significances.

[3] The word "stimulus" has meaning only in the sense of referring to some constancy experienced in the here and now, associated with some impingement which has significance only in terms of potential action relevant to experiencing intended consequences. The word can only be used as referring to something "real" and "objective" in traditional psychology because experiments are so deliberately arranged that no change in the prognostic significance of the "stimulus-datum" is permitted. A "stimulus" is only an occasion for a prognosis. Unless placed in such a behavioral context, the word can be a misleading abstraction.

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

If a person has to pay primary attention to the impingements of the here and now in trying to figure out *how* to do something by taking into account the potential significances around him, he is less able to be aware of those constancies that operate irrespective of space and time and that furnish the standards of what to do something *for* anyway. The latter—value inquiry—seems to involve very different processes than those we describe as "intellectual," "rational," or "logical" and which we put to use in common sense and in scientific method. Value inquiry—which aims to give us an understanding of the here and now in terms of more inclusive constants in our total reality—seems better described by such words as "meditation," "contemplation," "communion," or "prayer." Freedom from here and now pressures and demands is essential for value inquiry.

In using the word "inquiry," I am, of course, implying that a characteristic of human beings is their capacity to choose. From the transactional point of view, the process of choice involves a conscious weighing by a unique person in a unique behavioral situation in a universe where the future is undetermined. This awareness is to be differentiated from those weighing processes constantly involved on the unconscious level. These weighings are brought about by some obstacle or frustration encountered. The individual alone is responsible for his selection. Choice—as a process—further involves the initiation by action of some sequential events that will lead to the consequences desired, together with the registered effect of the occurrences that follow action. Choice is, of course, not entirely "free" but limited to certain alternatives that appear to be relevant to the situation. And the causal role a person plays in determining the choice he makes—his degree of responsibility—depends upon the extent of the various significances he takes into account or orchestrates in formulating his judgment. Individuals, then, as "causal" factors have, we say, a responsibility to behave to the best of their abilities. If they are sufficiently sensitized to their consciences, they do not need to make choices. But most of us, most of the time, seem faced by obstacles or frustrations of one kind or another that bubble into awareness and call for decision.

Since perception involves such a high degree of probability and since we must, nevertheless, act on the basis of some assumed constancies if we are to carry on at all in life, it is a characteristic of man that he develops what we call "faith." Faith appears to play a role in living when we experience a lack of surety concerning the present, when we are unable to accept the past, or when we are apprehensive about the future—all conditions where our sense

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

of the reliabilities of some constancies is shaken. St. Paul's analysis that "faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen" can perhaps be rephrased, if less eloquently, by saying that faith is a matter of hanging on to certain constancies in our own reality systems. Faith is a value sense of the worthwhileness of a reality system which transcends the boundary of time with whatever vicissitudes the present may hold.

Such, in brief, are some of the aspects of experience except for which human experience would not be what it is. Experience, then, has implicated within it: some impingements from the environment, physiological sensory processes, learned significances that have somehow become registered in us from the consequences of our past action, assumptions of constancy concerning both inorganic and organic events, choice, purposeful action, value satisfaction, some degree of faith. All of these aspects are interdependent. Hence, as any philosopher recognizes, we have borrowed the term "transaction" from Dewey and Bentley to describe experience in an attempt to rid ourselves of a universe bifurcated into "subjective" and "objective," and to avoid the oversimplification that comes from regarding different aspects of experience as discrete.

Our Sense of What is Real

Before we can fully proceed with the problem of ethical relativity from the transactional view, we must squarely face the question of what "reality" is anyway. For we cannot pretend to have a workable psychology unless we account for the observable fact that values are just as "real" as mountains, chairs, or automobiles for a behaving individual.

Although "reality" is ineffable in the last analysis, from the transactional view of a non-bifurcated world, reality includes all of the phenomena involved in the on-going process of living.

It may be useful to differentiate between different aspects of reality. First, there are those significances we are aware of and that we take into account from our personal, operational behavior centers. Such awarenesses are uniquely individual because of the uniqueness of every person and of every behavioral situation. These personal significances can be shared by others only to the extent that others have participated in the same circumstances for the same purposes. Second, we have significances we are aware of and take into account by means of conceptualized abstractions referred to by words or symbols. These may be brought to the focus of attention by certain conditions or may be recalled or referred to

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

whenever we care to. Examples would be our scientific formulations, maps, historical events, legal, ethical, and religious systems. They are common for many people whatever their purposes. Because such abstractions refer to repeatable and non-emergent aspects of reality and because they can be communicated, can become universal, and can be experienced by everyone, they do not play the same role as the non-bifurcated significances experienced by a behaving person carrying out his purposes from his unique behavioral center. Finally, we can differentiate abstractions that can be felt, hardly conceptualized, such as aesthetic or religious experiences we may share and that are represented in various symbolic forms.

All of these aspects of reality can be negated if there is sharp and consistent lack of correspondence between them and the consequences of purposeful action with respect to them. But negation of our unique personal realities is sensed very differently than a negation of our abstracted realities. The death of a family member or close friend requires a kind of faith to sustain us that is not at all required if the laws of Newtonian physics are upset.

If we feel that other people are responsible for negating our personal reality, we may blame them, fear them, or have nothing more to do with them unless we have the infinite compassion of a saint. If our social group negates our reality, we may become anti-social, revolutionary, or try other group affiliations. Words, agreements, customs, laws, or assemblies are all viable insofar as they enable people to participate effectively in carrying out their purposes. What really matters is what people can do with these abstractions. If they cannot act usefully with them, there is only play-acting which is sooner or later recognized as such and thrown over. If impersonal forces of nature negate our reality, we may become afraid or fatalistic. If our own behavior negates our reality, we may develop inferiorities or begin to hate ourselves.

Irrespective of the causes of such negation, the effect is to disrupt our stable form-worlds and to produce a lack of surety, an apprehension, a personal doubt concerning the reality of our own reality system. And under such circumstances we may and can turn to the aspect of reality differentiated above which is not so subject to negation, is commonly shared by others, can be communicated and recalled, and seems therefore to have a greater validity for us—the abstracted aspects of reality represented by our conceptual knowledge of science, history, ethics, or religion. This reality of abstracted forms thus plays or can play an indispensable role in seeing us through breakdowns in our personal reality systems by transcending them. Yet these abstracted realities are, in

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

the last analysis, no true substitute for our unique personal realities. For, among other things, the abstracted realities are relatively absolute and determined, cannot take account of the contingencies of specific situations in on-going life, and do not emphasize the dignity and sacredness of the individual and permit him fully to exercise his capacity for choice and the personal responsibility concomitant with choice.

And yet all of us sometimes and some of us all the time may substitute this reality of abstracted forms for a more personal, ineffable reality in order to avoid the obstacles and uncertainties of living. They give us a sense of security. But, at the same time, they deprive us of our opportunity to develop and emerge. It is only through the experience of encountering negations of our personal realities that we can develop and emerge as individuals.

But paradoxically enough and important in our understanding of the function of ethics, it is generally only by making use of abstracted aspects of reality that we can overcome these negations of our personal realities. We do this, of course, by deliberately making ourselves aware of certain aspects of abstracted realities potentially relevant to the problem that confronts us. We accomplish this through inquiry, examination, experimentation, contemplation, or prayer. We are seeking to discover through these abstracted realities—represented by the wisdom of the ages or by contemporaries we believe in—the reasons for the inadequacies in our personal reality systems so we can alter them, encompass more significances, and emerge to more effective and profound reality systems for our own operational use.

The degree to which we crave some stable significance varies, of course, with their importance to our present well-being or its enhancement. In seeking out these relevant aspects of abstracted realities, we make them real for us only by using them as the basis for our own choice and action in specific undetermined situations. We experience what they refer to; we do not simply recall them intellectually. These abstracted realities we seek, many of which we call "values," are, then, not real for us in their own right but are real only when they are operative in concrete situations. And in the context of the concreteness of personal behavior they are indispensable realities.

If there is not continued value satisfaction derived from the constancies in our personal reality systems, then those reality systems collapse. And it seems to be the desire of human beings to continue or to enhance the value satisfaction of living that gives the urge to put order into disorder, even though, of course, the process of putting order into disorder is an abstraction which the

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

individual who is putting the order into disorder is generally unaware of. Apparently a most basic want and responsibility of life is the urge to preserve reality and to continue this reality in an ever-changing cosmos.

Universal Standards and Unique Experiences

Since each individual is a unique organism with his own unique form-world, since behavioral situations are unique, and since ongoing events are seldom completely determined, there is almost an infinity of different personal realities. At the same time, however, because of certain basic characteristics similar to nearly all human beings, certain similar significances which behavioral situations have for them, together with certain repeatable significances in their environments and certain similarities in their past experiences, there are also many universal standards or universal aspects of reality. The two are, moreover, interdependent: the more universal aspects cannot exist if the more unique aspects do not exist. And there would be little significance to any unique experience in the here and now unless there were some universal standards against which to evaluate it.

The maintenance of already existing universal forms, or their ordered change under ever-changing conditions, is thus apparently essential for full satisfaction. Such maintenance of forms varies from taking care of our bodies to educating the young and preserving social, ethical, or religious standards. By his own choice and behavior every individual can affect—for better or for worse—the universal significances of his own form-world and the significances these may have to others. And because of the diversity of conditions, both between and within cultures, under which significant forms are maintained by individuals and groups, the perpetuation or ordered change of forms becomes a somewhat different responsibility for every individual and for every social group.

If an individual through his own responsible action is able to increase or enhance some already existing universal form, we call him "creative"—his uniqueness has become more universal; in religious terms he has related immanence with transcendence and become one with God. From the transactional point of view, creativity and the maintenance of form are both aspects of the same process of orchestration. And even though we may not be individuals who could be called "creative," each of us in our transactions of living seems in a small way to be trying to make the immanent transcendent, trying to operate in situations so the consequences of carrying out our purposes will maintain, confirm, or enhance our reality.

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

THE DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

We have tried here to show that the form-world which each individual develops in the course of his living is for him a reality —the only reality he knows. Unless this picture is clear, we will fail to see (1) that our awareness of our environment, including our social environment, is only a prognosis, an assumed form which, however, we must generally adhere to; (2) that we put order into the disorder of a non-repetitive universe by creating forms which provide for repetition and predictability and that we must generally adhere to; and (3) that in our social relations it is generally some socio-ethical form of behavior which makes it possible for any individual to guess how other people will behave and enable them to guess how he will behave. It is essential to understand this if we are to know to what extent conformity is desirable and when it should and should not be imposed.

If we fall into the common error of bifurcating the world into objective and subjective, then we are likely to assume falsely that both individuals and "objects" exist out there in their own right with all significances inherent in them. We will then be dealing with abstracted, mechanical individuals whom we can, to be sure, count, test, and classify as we do in the military. But we shall be denying ourselves and others any true social relationship with full-bodied individuals who are striving in the face of uncertainties and bolstered by faith as they make choices for which they are uniquely responsible in order to maintain or enhance a reality that will provide them a value satisfaction in living. All true social relationships are based on unabstracted realities. Any sense of real participation with others is based on the unabstracted togetherness of people where there is the possibility of mutual creative flow from form, of experiencing new consequences, new value satisfactions.

Furthermore, the Self, the "I", appears to be a reality only in transactional relationships in which, for human beings, other people are so crucially important. Our own significance seems to be determined in large part by the organisms and persons to whom we ourselves are significant. Hence we can never point to the "I", can never isolate it in time and space. Nor can we ever really "lose" it. The admonition of the prophets that one must "lose oneself" to "find oneself" or to experience God and reality makes sense, and eminent sense, only if we interpret it as meaning to rid oneself of those abstracted aspects which may be thwarting our personal participation in events from our own operational centers. Much of the recent criticism of fixed forms of psychoanalysis from

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

psychiatrists themselves seems to be saying that certain intellectual abstractions concerning the Self—and the concentration of the patient's awareness on these abstractions—are inimical to recovery and self-development.

There has been an understandable tendency on the part of ethnologists and psychologists in recent years to examine the differences between cultures and between individuals within a culture. The results have been most important. But this emphasis has, I think, tended to obscure the similarities human beings have as human beings which are imbedded in their chromosome structure and which must be borne very much in mind if we are to understand the function of ethical systems irrespective of their diverse forms and specifications. Some of these similarities we have already referred to: man's desire to participate in the creation of value satisfactions which will enrich the quality of his experience; man's capacity to choose; man's ability to sustain himself through obstacles and adversities with symbols and meanings of faith; man's creativity. In addition we should mention some of the more elemental similarities: the life cycle most of us go through of puberty, mating, having children, growing old, dying. Each stage of this process seems to call forth in any culture a complex of ethical standards and rituals. Further, human beings face uncertainties that are more or less similar: sickness and disease, the elements, thwarted ambitions, etc.

No matter how diverse the social and ethical standards may be that mankind has developed through the ages and in various cultural groups and sub-groups, they are all ultimately attempts to increase the possibility of gaining greater satisfaction in living. And human living—as such—has, I believe, similar psychological aspects due to the similarities we have as human beings.

Established ethical principles as abstracted realities communicated from generation to generation provide the constancy and the repeatability essential for the sharing of significances. Since they are subject to recall they can become substantive aspects of faith when our personal realities are upset. In the diverse occasions of living where the determined of the past merges with the undetermined of the future, they serve as a compass that gives an unanalyzed integration to our purposes. Furthermore, ethical standards frequently provide criteria which we unconsciously use as guides of what significances to take into account.

It is little wonder, then, that we find people everywhere reaching for certain universals, certain ultimates which seem operationally so similar when their function is understood. An example might be man's age-old search for God with all the forms of deity

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

or supernatural power this search has brought forth. Certain conditions characteristic of human living would seem not only to account for this search but to be necessary for it: man's frustrations, disappointments, and agonies; man's capacity to seek through inquiry or contemplation those future conditions that might mitigate or resolve his problems; man's capacity to act—in other ways, symbolically—to bring about the conditions he believes will alter his reality to his benefit. If "God" becomes a static abstraction, he can never be experienced; if "God" is a process he may be occasionally experienced. But the conditions for this experiencing are, to repeat, characteristically human and are necessary conditions.

Transactional psychology would, of course, be with those who urge a cultural pluralism. It would also give support to those great ethical systems which urge in different words that we do unto others as we would have others do unto us. For it would appear that the morality of any human action is to be judged in terms of the extent to which it takes account of the purposes of all others who might be affected by it. This form of neo-pragmatism—where action that appears to be most effective in the long run also appears to be most ethical—may be considerably speeded up by modern artifacts which are accelerating man's convergence on man. They may hasten the day when we shall all find it easier to experience in our own behavior what our ethical abstractions refer to and thus enable us to use these abstractions in our diverse and unique personal and cultural ways while still being faithful to the abstractions themselves, merging our individual realities with universal realities.

HADLEY CANTRIL

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

BOOK REVIEWS

A Philosophy of the Real and the Possible. HARRY TODD COSTELLO. New York: Columbia University Press, 1954. 153 pp. (Woodbridge Lectures, Delivered at Columbia University, Number Four.) $2.75.

At the beginning of the first of these five Woodbridge Lectures, Professor Costello warns his readers that, as he goes, he may "reminisce a bit"; and he indeed does so, very interestingly, throughout the book. This reviewer is thereby tempted into a bit of reminiscing of his own, to the effect that when many years ago he was Royce's assistant in his logic course, he found, among the

This content downloaded from 128.187.103.98 on Fri, 23 Oct 2015 22:54:22 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions